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Making it Count

10.21.2008 | Students, Culture and Society

University of Dayton junior Taylor Lally grew up in Illinois and voted for the first time in 2006 in that state's race for governor. And though he still calls Illinois home, the John McCain supporter plans to cast his vote Nov. 4 in Ohio.

"Illinois is Barack Obama's home state," Lally said. "There's not really any chance at all that McCain is going to win Illinois. Ohio on the other hand is a battleground state and is very much undecided."

Lally registered to vote in Ohio last spring. As a student at an Ohio university, he is eligible to register here by state law, which requires a person to be a resident of Ohio for at least 30 days immediately before the election.

The Electoral College system, which awards all of a state's electoral votes to the presidential candidate who wins the majority of votes in the state, makes swing states critically important in electing the president of the United State

In 2000, it was Florida. In 2004, it was Ohio. George W. Bush won both states by thin margins, and as a result, he won the presidency. That history is not lost on young voters.

"Every vote counts, but it definitely means more in swing states," Lally said. "If you have the chance to make your vote more meaningful, why wouldn't you?"

Olivia Walker, a UD senior from Tennessee, agrees. As an Obama supporter, Walker was excited about voting, but she didn't like the odds in her home state.

She voted for the first time in the 2004 presidential election when Bush won the state with 57 percent of the vote. Recent polls show McCain ahead of Obama in Tennessee by a margin of nearly 20 points.

This summer, while volunteering with the Obama campaign in Dayton on voter registration drives, she discovered that as resident of the UD student neighborhood she is eligible to vote in Ohio. She was reluctant at first but eventually made the switch.

"I still think every vote counts," she said. "I don't want to say my vote wouldn't count in Tennessee. But Ohio is a such an important swing state, and I can make more of a difference voting here."

Lally and Walker are not alone.

UD senior Kelly Collingwood of Iowa served a fellowship this summer with the Obama campaign. With polls in Iowa showing a tight race, Collingwood chose to cast an absentee ballot in her home state, but she did help between five and 10 out-of-state UD students register as Ohio voters. Most of them supported Obama, she said.

"They would actually come to me and ask if I thought it would be better for them to vote in their home state or Ohio, and I would tell them Ohio is more of a battleground state," she said.

Lally said he has a friend from Illinois attending school in Florida, another critical swing state, who recently changed his voter registration.

While Lally and Walker are both quick to admit the Electoral College can elevate the importance of swing states and render some votes more meaningful, neither supports switching to a popular vote, which would require a Constitutional amendment. And past elections have seen states change support between the two parties, proving candidates can take no vote for granted.

"The Electoral College system recognizes the integrity and importance of every state," said Christopher Duncan, chair of the political science department at the University of Dayton. "It also forces candidates to forge a broad coalition across multiple political cultures and locations thereby giving him or her the basis for legitimate governance."

"I don't ever see the U.S. changing this system both because of the sheer difficulty of changing the Constitution itself, and also because of a healthy fear of large state dominance of the process and the relative feelings of disenfranchisement smaller states would no doubt feel."

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